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# Centralising HR data processes at Avon

Operating in 60 countries makes harmonising HR data processes and binning legacy systems no small feat. JENNY ROPER discovers how Avon did it

## The company

Avon was established in 1886 when travelling book salesman David H. McConnell spotted the opportunity to employ the housewives he met, to sell cosmetics. More than 130 years later Avon has grown into a 60-country company with 30,000 employees. And that doesn't include the six million sales reps across the world who've been given the chance – often in countries and regions where this wouldn't otherwise be possible – to earn a good wage in a way that fits around their daily lives.

## The challenge

"If the CEO asked how many people we had in the organisation there'd be a few blank faces," says Avon's EMEA regional lead and global HR portal lead Helen Gowler on the people data situation at the cosmetics brand just two years ago. "Our CEO expected to wait a week to find out how many people she had," she adds.

The problem, Gowler explains, wasn't that the data wasn't being processed. It was rather that the company's 60 countries all had a different way of doing things. And Avon had no way of pulling key stats up in an immediate, accessible way.

"We were still doing the job and achieving what we needed to achieve but we couldn't

point to any tangible value from it. It was diluting what I believe could be an opportunity for HR in the business," she reports, adding: "We ran around 60 countries with different legacy systems in each location... We were all talking different HR languages, there were no common definitions for data."

"Two years ago it was an uphill struggle for HR," Gowler adds, depicting a situation many in the profession will be all too familiar with in relation to data.

## The method

To make HR data much more central to driving business decisions and improving outcomes, Avon's central HR team realised it needed a whole new system that was consistent between countries.

But it also needed something that would very quickly add value, both for business leaders and the HR practitioners around the world now being held much more accountable for the accuracy of their data, and being told they needed to process it in a whole new way.

"We didn't want to just lift and shift [into a new system]. We needed something that could provide value for the organisation," says Gowler.

This is where Workday came in, with a whole new people analytics system going live in 44 of Avon's 60 locations on 1 April 2014. Luckily the business (and its HR generalists) quickly realised its value, as Gowler had set herself the ambitious target of October 2014 for when people first started to realise "why we invested in the system".

"I was always very conscious that we were coming out from the centre saying: 'you need to do this, you need to do that'. But they [Avon's HR generalists] still had a job to do. So that's where we really needed to [ensure that they] got on with the dashboards and give them some payback," says Gowler.



Improving HR capability around data analytics has improved the perception of HR internally

"We had to prove how useful and trustworthy this data was to HR," she continues. "They were accountable for the data previously but nobody ever spoke to them about it. It was just data and they would process it when they needed to. All of a sudden there was this clear visibility of 'this is your data'. In a few places people were saying: 'Really? My data?'"

"But we needed those HR generalists to know there was a very strong, clear message to say we really need to manage this going forward, and that it's really important that the data is accurate."

As well as very quickly showing how valuable these new dashboards could be in supporting HR activities, Avon had to get its global HR team on board through a carefully orchestrated change management programme.

This took the form of appointing cluster change agents in each country who underwent 'train the trainer' sessions in the UK and then cascaded this back to their countries through meetings, face to face training, and video conferences. Again though, Avon had to be mindful of the fact these change agents were doing this "on top of their day jobs".

"It was a slim project team, frankly. We didn't have the luxury of dedicated change management resource," says Gowler, reiterating that this meant the wider HR team needed to immediately see the value of the change: "There was a lot of visioning so people could understand this is going to be our journey and this is the timeline for that journey; this is where we're going to end up," she says.

It was also important during the pre-launch tendering and design phase – set in motion in May 2013 – that leaders and managers were consulted on what would add value but in a way that didn't make their lives harder. "They were busy... So we asked them: what sort of activity do you want to see?" says Gowler.

### The result

Just over two years after the Workday system's launch, and HR data is now used and appreciated by all areas of the

business – and to increasing degrees. "All of a sudden, quietly, people are picking up on the dashboards and saying 'ok I can use this information'. We're cascading the mobile element out this year... key leaders have got the ability at the tap of a button to pull up the data when they need it," says Gowler.

"Workday is now the global system of record that feeds all downstream business, supporting for example supply chain systems, legal systems, expense and IT systems, through interfaces and reporting. Hence there is more importance than ever before on HR data feeding other business systems, and having real-time accurate data is paramount."

Most crucially the business is already spotting areas for improvement and making changes off the back of these, says Gowler. She cites time to complete a hire, which has gone down from six to four days. "With the talent insight dashboards not only can we now see what positions we have successors for, but we can look at whether they're ready. It might be that the nearest successor is two or three years away," she continues, adding that "managers have more accountability now because the data is visible".

"The next level is predictive analytics – so merging HR intelligence with business intelligence to provide valuable insight to make business decisions,"

Gowler explains. "I'm not convinced many in HR have got to that point yet. There's lots of talk but it's more 'this is where we're going...'"

It's important that the central HR team and Workday continue to add functionality that further enhances value, as "a parallel piece" to HR generalists and the business adopting the systems, says Gowler. "We need that desire to grow... I think one adds to the other. The more we can give them the more fruitful and dynamic the information. That gives us more dynamic data to give back to our users."

She concludes: "To be in the position where we're now considering what next, and the momentum's there, that's been the significant piece for me."

"One of the key things is HR is now seen as an enabler; people are now listening." **HR**

### Fact file

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**Organisation:**

AVON

**Turnover:**

Approx. \$6.2 billion

**Locations:**

60 worldwide

**Employees:**

30,000 worldwide

**Number in HR operations team:**

20

**Case study focus:**

Harmonising people analytics across 60 countries to provide the organisation with real-time, business-critical HR data

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With 30,000 employees globally, Avon needed to focus on change management



Investing in data has helped Avon spot areas for improvement



Avon implemented Workday's people analytics system in 2014